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ABSTRACT

The ways in which second language learners and teachers together can develop learners' ability to carry on conversation in the target language are examined. The discussion is based on the idea that practicing language skills, therefore creating opportunities to gain additional knowledge, is essential to continued learning, whereas using such techniques as miming, pointing, avoiding particular topics, or shifting from one topic to another when vocabulary runs out is unproductive. Emphasis is on English-as-a-Second-Language teaching. It is proposed that because conversation is purposeful, unpredictable, and jointly negotiated, and uses language patterns unlike those used in textbooks, second language learners must be taught strategies for managing conversation. Four classroom teaching principles are offered: using one's own creativity, flexibility, and listening skills; exploiting what learners bring in the way of language knowledge and social competence; using authentic texts; and taking advantage of the classroom as a social setting in which genuine interaction occurs. Teachers can use problem-reducing and problem-creating strategies to either avoid risk to students or to challenge them. Learners can be taught to use reduction strategies (playing it safe) and achievement strategies (directly addressing problems, for both coping and fine-tuning). Specific behaviors corresponding to these strategies are outlined. (Contains 12 references.) (MSE)

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STAYING IN THE GAME: MAKING CONVERSATION IN THE CLASSROOM

(Paper presented to the Second International Symposium on English Language Teaching, Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, November 19-21, 1993)

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INTRODUCTION

The English satirical novelist, Evelyn Waugh, comments in his diaries about a friend of his: "He was of that species of Englishman who never spoke a foreign language unless he could speak it well and, as a consequence, never did."

As we know, people have devoted their entire careers to developing theories of second language learning - or is it acquisition, or is it development? Evelyn Waugh, however - who was, incidentally, such a bad teacher he attempted to commit suicide by swimming out to sea at night (he swam back to shore because he was being bitten by things in the water) - has managed to sum up an entire profession in one common sense sentence.

We learn to drive a car by driving it. We learn to swim by swimming. We learn to play the piano by playing and - notwithstanding recipe books - we even learn to cook only by cooking. We make mistakes. But we have to start somewhere. Just as interesting is the fact that, having learned how to do it, we find it difficult to explain **how** we do it. Moreover, we find it hard to think about it **while** we are doing it - imagine trying to play the piano or drive a car if you insisted on thinking about the process step by step.

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In this paper I want to look at how learners and teachers together can develop learners' ability to interact effectively in everyday conversation.

I use the term "develop" deliberately, because what I am talking about is using what the learner already has in the way of resources - knowledge and skills in the target language, knowledge and skills in language generally, together with the learner's knowledge of the world - together

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with various communication strategies in order to develop his ability to communicate in the TL.

This is a common sense proposition. You can only learn to speak a language by speaking it. By talking to other people, you practise the skills you already have and have the opportunity to observe the skills of other people. You practise retrieving the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge which is all back there, but often just out of conscious reach. At the same time, you are picking up new knowledge from the people you are speaking to.

This is what I mean by "staying in the game". As the saying goes: "You have to be in it to win it." To win the game, you have to manage to stay in it - somehow. As Richards and Schmidt (1983) have pointed out and, more recently, Richard Johnstone (1989), among others, foreign language learners use a variety of strategies - or **repairs** - to keep communicating.

Some of these strategies are better than others, of course - which is to say, some are more productive than others.

For example, miming, pointing, avoiding particular topics or simply shifting from one topic to another when you can't think of the right words are not particularly productive strategies. In fact, they result in dropping out of the game.

On the other hand, using synonyms, paraphrasing or even coining words and borrowing from other languages are fine because they keep the conversation going. Indeed, they are used by NS's,too, to stay in the game.

Saying you have to use a language to learn it, may be just common sense. But, if so, it is often more honoured in the breach than in the observance, both by teachers and by learners who have not been shown or have not realised for themselves that learning a foreign language requires commitment, a conscious **decision** to do what is necessary to succeed, just as all those "good language learners" do who are described in books like Doug Pickett's (1978), Joan Rubin's (1982) and Naiman et al (1978).

This may also be a good opportunity to remind everyone in our profession that there is room for common sense, especially since there is now reason to doubt that relentlessly empirical and reductionist approaches by themselves lead to development in competencies which are by their nature extremely complex and dynamic.

This is not the topic of this paper. But it is implicit in much of what I want to say. So, let me move on.

WHAT IS ELT?

What about this familiar acronym "ELT"? What does it mean? It might be stretching it too far to say that it means all things to all men. But it does seem to have at least two meanings:

Firstly, it can mean English Language Teaching.

On the other hand, it can mean English Language Training.

It is possible to see two quite different models implied in these two meanings.

English Language Teaching implies what Donald Schön (1983) refers to as the Technical Rationality or Applied Science model of professional knowledge. This involves the transmission of knowledge which has been systematically organised as a result of the analysis of data. It is about **solving problems** which, by implication, can be predicted.

Hence, ELT has traditionally distinguished between research and practice. The researchers - whom we call applied linguists - go off and analyse the language used by native speakers, these days trying to match it up with situations and functions. Having done that, these match-ups of predictable language in predictable situations are used as the basis for a syllabus and we then teach them using a variety of methods.

English Language Training, though, suggests another approach altogether. Consider this this short passage from Donald Schön's, **The Reflective Practitioner** (1983:49):

"When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is that we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate."

He could well be talking about language here. To linguists, language may be reducible to patterns and lend it itself to neat descriptions of matching forms, situations and functions. But this is not the case with the people who use language who would be hard-pressed to talk objectively about the

language they are using. So, if NS's can get by so well without these ordered and explicit descriptions, why should we assume that foreign language learners will need them?

Well, of course, there are some good reasons and I am not about to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

But, again using Schön for inspiration, I simply want to point out a number of crucial things.

First, speaking a language - that is, holding a conversation - is not about problem-solving, but about **problem-setting** which, in Schön's words (40) is "the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen."

So, in conversation, it involves deciding what the conversation is about, what its purpose is, what we want our outcomes to be, what we will do to manage the conversation and so on.

The **second point** is that communicative situations are far from being fully predictable. In fact, social life is essentially uncertain and unpredictable and to be socially functional creatures we need to develop skills which enable us to negotiate the uncertainties of social interaction.

Finally, since I have used the word "negotiate", we need to remember that meanings do not exist in the form of taxonomies classified according to functions and situations. This is a reductionist fallacy.

Meanings are jointly negotiated - or created, if you like - by the people having the conversation. Creating meaning is a joint effort, just as communicating is a joint effort requiring active participation by everyone involved.

Let me illustrate my point in a way which relates directly to our teaching situations.

Marion Williams (in **Applied Linguistics 9,1.** March, 1988. 45-58) reports on a study she carried out which compared the language taught in thirty Business English textbooks with the language actually used in a number of business meetings involving NS's. Language here means match-ups of functions with exponents (or language forms).

What she found is quite alarming. The language used in the meetings differed enormously from the language presented in tapes and films

accompanying the text books. Real language, for example, was often ungrammatical, featured false starts, unfinished sentences, interruptions, redundancy, repetition and lengthy explanations. Significantly, it lacked the overtly polite forms which so often feature in the text books.

Although, many of the functions taught were present, of the 135 exponents taught to realise 12 functions, only seven were, in fact, used - one of which was described by the textbooks as rude!

Williams also points out that the functions used in the meetings were not necessarily realised explicitly. Rather, the function being performed was made clear by presuppositions, situation and context.

Finally, few of the functions were commonly realised by any one exponent. A wide range of forms was generally used to realise the functions.

In conclusion, Williams has this to say (53):

"In the meetings examined, the speakers' use of language was far more complex than simply realising functions with suitable exponents. There was evidence of care being taken by speakers in selecting strategies and planning their tactics in order to achieve their purpose in the most effective way. Speakers tended to build up arguments and support their information and views in consistent ways. They appeared to exhibit an awareness of the needs of the listeners and of how the listeners might react, and select their strategies accordingly."

She concludes by saying that "...a look at strategies might provide a more promising starting point for our teaching materials than do lists of over-polite, over-explicit, one-sentence-long exponents for functions."

This conclusion echoes other conclusions about conversation that have been about for a long time. Erving Goffman, for example, in 1974 noted that conversation depends largely on **interaction**:

"...the expression of claims regarding inner states is not what takes up most of the individual's speaking time. Nor is much time actually spent in giving orders, announcing decisions, declining requests, making offers, and the like. And when any of these possibilities do occur, they often do so indirectly, operating through something else; they are an effect that is produced, but an effect that tells us little about the details of the strip of activity that produces it."

In 1977, Labov and Fanshel made the point that it was not so much speech acts such as requests and assertions that propel conversation forward and establish coherence of sequencing in conversation, but rather **interactional acts** like challenges, defences and retreats which have to do with the status of participants, their rights and obligations.

These strategic manoeuvrings are, of course, typical of the interactions of language learners in natural situations.

Here are several exchanges I recorded with my two year-old son, Oliver:

Oliver: Boggle.
Paul: Bottle?
Oliver: Boggle.
Paul: You want your bottle?
Oliver: (Makes noise of affirmation)

Oliver: Thees.
Paul: This - what?
Oliver: Thees.
Paul: You want this?
Oliver: More of this.
Paul: You want more juice?

Paul: Take this and put it in the garbage.
Oliver: (Pointing to food scraps) This?
Paul: That's right. Take the scraps and put them in the bin.
Oliver: (Takes the scraps and puts them in the bin)
Paul: Thankyou.

Oliver: (Banging spoon against a saucepan) Noise.
Paul: (Trying to work) Yes, I've noticed. Very noisy.
Oliver: Oh. (Goes away)

What we see here is a typical exchange between a parent and a child demonstrating how a child develops its L1 as part of conversational interaction. With a child as young as this, much of the responsibility falls on the adult who uses a variety of strategies including comprehension checks, requests for confirmation, repetitions and expansions. Note in particular how the adult uses what the child gives as the basis for creating a conversation.

Here is a conversation I had with an adult English learner in Czechoslovakia where similar strategies are used as well as typical L2 learner strategies such as approximations and borrowing:

Paul: So, how's your English going?
Natalie: (Looks blank)
Paul: Your English learning - have you made any progress?
Natalie: Now I have...much?
Paul: A lot of...?
Natalie: Yes, a lot of...Arbeit.
Paul: Work.
Natalie: Yes, work...in television. Synchronisation?
Paul: Dubbing.
Natalie: Yes, dubbing.
Paul: There's a lot of work for actors dubbing in Czechoslovakia.
Natalie: Yes, a lot
Paul: So, that's why you haven't been able to go to English class?
Natalie: Yes.

This, of course, is real language, not the language found in text books - the reason being that text books are, by and large, concerned not with communication as Paul, Natalie and Oliver are, but with language forms.

Indeed, it is often not even the language of the language classroom. Look at this exchange quoted by Dave Willis (1990:1-2):

Antonio: Socoop, do you like being a father?
Socoop: Yes, erm...I am a father of four children.
Teacher: Yes, all right. But listen to the question.
(Socoop is unsuccessful in his subsequent replies)
Teacher: (Finally) Yes, I do. I **like being** a father.

Here the last thing on the teacher's mind is engaging in authentic communication with the student or with encouraging authentic interactions between the learners. If we treated our children like this they would be mute for life. Moreover, NS's who are **not** teachers, would never dream of talking to NNS's in this manner.

Interestingly enough, Prabhu (1987) reports that more often than not it is not the items explicitly taught in the classroom that are learned readily by the learners, but the authentic language of classroom management - giving instructions, explaining, running comprehension checks and so on.

What all this means is not so much that we can do without text books or course books, but rather that we are looking for different types of text books and that, by their very nature, text books are of limited value.

It also has implications for the way we regard the classroom and the role of conversation in the classroom, never forgetting that the classroom is itself a social situation.

IMPLICATIONS

Well, if we can't rely on textbooks in the L2 classroom, what can we rely on?

Firstly, we can rely on ourselves as teachers to be creative and flexible, to listen to what is being said to us and to use that as the basis for developing our learners' English.

Secondly, we can rely on the learners to bring a lot to the classroom which is useable - namely, what they know of the L2 already, their knowledge of language in general and their social knowledge and competence.

Thirdly, we can rely on authentic texts - real language in real situations.

Finally, we can rely on the classroom as a social setting and the interactions which take place there, especially if we provide the learners with the strategic resources necessary to make the most of what they have.

From the teacher's point of view this is to do with what you say and how you interact. The teacher acts as a) activator, initiating authentic interactions, b) model, and c) interlocutor.

From the learners' point of view it is also to do with what they say and how they interact. It is to do with what they say in order to stay in the game, from maintaining contact (coping strategies) through to effective communication.

From the syllabus' point of view it is to do with the materials which provide language input and set up activities.

I am not concerned here with the syllabus aspect. But consult Dave Willis' book, **The Lexical Syllabus** (1990), where he refers to genuinely communicative activities as **replication activities** because they replicate real world communication in the classroom. As he points out, (59) there is already a wealth of such activities available to teachers involving games, problem-solving and information-gathering and information transfer where the learners use language for real communication - what they say **needs** to be said, what they say is a matter of choice and the social outcomes are not prescribed, but the unpredictable result of the learners collaboration.

In conclusion, let me look at communication strategies and their exponents used to stay in the game.

TEACHER TALK AND LEARNER TALK

We are dealing with the nature of what teachers and learners say to one another and what learners say to other learners. At the same time, we need to realise that talk as such is a part of the bigger activity of communicating involving crucial components such as non-content cues (body language, phonology etc.), presupposition, contextual clues and so on.

Hence, we need to **raise the consciousness** of learners concerning the purposes and strategies of communication so that they focus on communication itself rather than the language forms.

Then we need to develop **the strategies and language exponents** required to keep a conversation going - to stay in the game - because this is the best chance the learners have of developing their existing language skills.

I have already noted that learners naturally use a variety of strategies to stay in the game and that some of these are more desirable or productive than others.

It needs to be pointed out that teachers, too, naturally use a variety of strategies to communicate with the learners and that these, too, can be either productive or inhibiting - as we saw in my examples of parent and child and Dave Willis' teacher to learner.

Richard Johnstone in his book, **Communicative Interaction: A Guide for Language Teachers** (1989) distinguishes between the two types of teacher's strategies by calling them Problem-reducing Strategies and

Problem-creating Strategies. In the former, the teacher avoids challenging the learners to take the risks necessary to develop their proficiency further, while in the latter, the teacher actually challenges the learners to push beyond their existing proficiency - something which will not only lead to a development of language skills, but which will also be more interesting and motivating.

Similarly, with learners he distinguishes between **reduction strategies** and **achievement strategies.** This basically implies a choice between playing safe when faced with the unpredictability of communication events and coming out boldly and intelligently to meet the various problems thrown up in communication.

Achievement strategies according to Johnstone include both coping strategies and what he calls fine-tuning strategies.

When learners use coping strategies they are staying in the game as best they can. They imply a focus on the immediate communication problem.

Fine-tuning, however, implies looking ahead and developing strategies for staying the game when similar communication problems crop up in the future. Essentially, of course, this simply means developing language skills in the target language.

TEACHERS

What can teachers do to help their learners stay in the game?

The short answer is: be good communicators - and use all the strategies good communicators use.

These include **active listening**, sometimes called **reflective listening.** Here the listener actively participates by reflecting back meanings and feelings to the speaker. In this way the listener actively pursues the joint negotiation of meaning I referred to earlier.

The listener responds to the speaker, stating in the listener's own words the content of what the speaker has said.

Examples of reflective listening openers might be:

So, what you're saying is...

You mean...

You think...

Or, simply a paraphrase of what the speaker has said.

Likewise, we can learn from what parents say to children and what NS's say to NNS's. They -

* Confirm their understanding with the listener - "Too expensive?"
* Clarification request - "Sorry?" "I didn't quite catch that."
* Comprehension checks - "So, then he left the country - right?"
* Query whether you have heard correctly - "Did you say...?"
* Paraphrase
* Expand speaker's utterances
* Repeat speaker's utterances
* Fill in pauses - giving the speaker time to "tune in".
* Feed back correct form

The teacher's objective in using such strategies is to generate authentic conversation in the classroom. This conversation can take three basic forms:

a) Teacher to whole class

b) Teacher to individuals and/or small groups

c) Learner to learner

To elaborate briefly on these three types of interaction:

a) Teacher to whole class: The aim is to generate interaction, to establish a conversational basis for classroom activity, to provide a model of conversational routines/gambits and communication strategies.

b) Teacher to individuals/small groups: To generate interaction at a more intimate level, to provide a model, to activate small group conversation.

c) Learner to learner: To generate interaction, maximise language activity, lower learners' levels of anxiety by having them interact with their peers rather than the teacher.

LEARNERS

Teachers will have to draw learners' attention to the various strategies for staying the game as well as introduce them to a repertoire of verbal routines (or verbal exponents of these strategies).

Here are some which I have adapted from Richard Johnstone:

* Ask the speaker to repair - "Sorry, what did you say?"
"I didn't quite catch that."
"You said...?"
"Are you saying...?"

* Interrupt and paraphrase - "What I meant was..."
" I'm saying..."

* Solicit feedback - "Is that clear?"
" OK?"
"Do you follow me?"

* Consciously look for clues - listen for intonation, follow discourse markers, check background knowledge, watch for non-verbal clues

* Guess at meanings

* Signal comprehension or incomprehension. Either making noises of affirmation, nodding head, occasional fillers like "Right", "I see", "Yes", or "Could you say that again?", "What was that?", "Sorry?", "I don't understand."

* When in particular difficulty, gesture, code-switch, borrow, make up words.

* Use simplified structures

* Use an all-purpose word or phrase when the precise lexis is not known - "Whats-it", "Thing", "You know..." (Appeal for help)

* Paraphrase - "You know, the person who..."

* Be prepared to re-start and be not feel obliged to be perfect

* Draw attention to the fact that you are still learning the language - "I'm not sure how you say this, but..."

* Appeal for repair or confirmation - "How do you say...?", "What's the word...?" Start the utterance and allow the other person to finish it.

* Master the elements of turn-taking
- Turn-getting - "But listen - ", "Yes, so...", "If I could just say..."
- Turn-maintaining - "Then...", "So...", Making noises to fill in gaps.
- Turn-giving - "Isn't that so?", "What do you think?", "Or...?", "Yes...?"

IN CONCLUSION

Rather than accept the classroom as an artificial environment, we can (as Teresa Pica, 1987, insists) recognise that it is a genuine social environment.

It follows that we should not see the classroom simply as somewhere to introduce and practise language forms, but as a place where genuine interaction can - and does - take place.

I have suggested that teachers shold aim to hold genuine conversations with their learners and go beyond the traditional precoccupation with "getting it right". In doing this, they can learn from parents and native-speaking non-teachers who typically use a variety of strategies to keep the conversation going and reach an understanding of what the L2 speaker is trying to say - which, of course, implies that L2 learners do have something to say which is worth listening to.

At the same time, teachers can provide learners with the resources to maintain interaction. The learners' success in "staying in the game" will not only lead to a development of their language skills, but increase their motivation to keep trying to learn and use the language.

At the risk of confusing you all by changing my metaphor at this late stage, I am reminded of a Little Golden Book I had as a child. Some of you may even know it - it was called **Tootle**. Tootle was a young train learning how to be a train. The one thing that was drummed into him was: staying on the rails no matter what! No matter what happened, a train had to stay on the rails.

In our case, the rails are communication and our learners ought to be given the same imperative: what matters is staying on the rails no matter what.

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